

Forgiveness as Conditional: A Reply to Kleinig*

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Abstract

In my paper “Moral Grounds for Forgiveness,” I argued that forgiveness is morally appropriate only when a sincere apology is received, thus ruling out the three grounds for unconditional forgiveness suggested by John Kleinig in his paper “Forgiveness and Unconditionality.” In response to his reply “Defending Unconditional Forgiveness,” I argue here that my terminology, once clarified, does not undermine my construal of resentment; that conditional forgiveness is just as discretionary as unconditional forgiveness; and that what we choose to take into account when we forgive must be a morally appropriate grounding for that particular end, but that only a sincere apology could satisfy this condition. I end by conceding that the three grounds suggested by Kleinig nevertheless play an essential role in the process of (conditional) forgiveness insofar as they facilitate a willingness to forgive and an openness toward accepting an apology.

1. DEFENDING CONDITIONAL FORGIVENESS

1.1 The Moral Function of Resentment

In my initial paper “Moral Grounds for Forgiveness,”¹ I began by setting out a range of moral concepts and principles that I took to be largely uncontroversial, at least for those who subscribe to “universalistic morality.”² I then argued that conditional forgiveness seemed to accord better with these concepts and principles than unconditional forgiveness. I took it that, since this argument proceeded from a body of shared assumptions, it did not beg the question. However, in making this case, I used a number of terms—such as “contempt,” “threat” and “protective shield”—that are perhaps less commonly employed in this context. Kleinig appears to have read my use of

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² Cf. “[A]cceptable grounds for forgiveness must be compatible with self-respect, respect for others as moral agents, and respect for the rules of morality and the moral order,” writes Jeffrie G. Murphy, “Forgiveness and Resentment,” in Jeffrie G. Murphy and Jean Hampton, *Forgiveness and Mercy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 24.

this language as stacking the deck in favor of conditional forgiveness, given that I use this terminology to characterize the function of resentment and this characterization, if true, would rule out the moral acceptability of unconditional forgiveness.³ However, this “strategy,” Kleinig argues, fails in any case. These terms cannot play the role that they do in my argument unless they apply to *all* moral breaches. Yet there are, Kleinig claims, moral breaches in which the applicability of such terms would be “dubious” or “questionable.” Hence, my defense of forgiveness is flawed, and so the door opens to unconditional forgiveness. In the following, I argue that my terminology does not have such dire implications.

Contempt

In my initial paper, I explained that I would be using the term “contempt” as a way of capturing a particular range of “attitudes and behaviors,” such as “not recognizing,” “ignoring,” “denying,” or “challenging” someone’s moral equality. It was, in other words, intended to be conceptually equivalent to “disrespect.” I was, however, reluctant to deploy “disrespect” as a catch-all term on the grounds that, unlike “contempt,” it can be heard, especially by victims, as too anodyne to capture the enormity of what it is to wrong another human being. This is more of an issue for serious offenses, such as murder or rape. But it seemed to me that using “contempt” in the context of even minor or mitigated wrongs might serve to illuminate the gravity of what we are doing *whenever* we fail to respect the moral worth of another person.⁴

Nevertheless, given how I intended this word to be understood, it would be difficult to maintain the view that this terminology loads the dice or begs any questions in favor of conditional forgiveness. The term could be replaced at every point in my account by “disrespect,” and my characterization of resentment would remain the same, as would its implications for the moral acceptability of unconditional forgiveness. As such, Kleinig’s putative counter-examples to the general applicability of “contempt” do not, in themselves, undermine my account. If tax cheating, negligently denting someone’s car, and the like, can be characterized as *a failure to respect the moral*

³ Kleinig suggests that I am using this language “strategically,” insofar as he sees a “psychological progression from the language of ‘contempt’ to that of ‘threat’ and hence to that of a ‘protective shield’.” John Kleinig, “Defending Unconditional Forgiveness,” *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 35, no.1 (2022): 2, n. 5. [All page reference to this paper refer to the online first version].

⁴ See Raimond Gaita’s not dissimilar rationale for using “preciousness” as an alternative to “inherent worth,” and in particular his response to putative “counter-examples” such as Eichmann. Raimond Gaita, *A Common Humanity: Thinking about Love and Truth and Justice* (London and NY: Routledge, 2002), xxiii-xxiv.

worth of another human being, then these cases amount to “contempt,” as I was using the term. If they cannot be characterized in this way, they are not moral breaches—in which case, they are irrelevant.⁵

Threat

Kleinig is unsure whether I was using the term “threat” to denote a physical danger, a “symbolic” threat, or some combination of both. So, to be clear, I meant this term to refer *only* to a moral threat: that is, the kind of threat that arises for me when someone fails to respect my moral worth. Unfortunately, Kleinig’s uncertainty on this matter infects his critique. He ascribes connotations to my use of the word that would only serve as counter-examples to its general applicability if I had intended “threat” to entail the presence of a physical danger.⁶ For instance, Kleinig claims that “the lack of apology can[not] be read as signaling a continuing menace”⁷; and that “One is indignant, not fearful.”⁸ Once again, the term “threat” could be replaced with a less colorful turn of phrase, such as “being the recipient of disrespect,” and there would be no substantive loss to my construal of resentment. Nevertheless, like “contempt,” it seems to me that the word “threat,” once disambiguated, is both accurate and instructive.

Ongoing Threat

Kleinig contends that “victimization does not represent an ongoing threat.”⁹ I will not reiterate the main reasons that I gave for this characterization in my

⁵ As it happens, I think “contempt” *can* be sensibly applied in such cases. It seems both natural and morally illuminating to say that a tax cheat shows contempt toward her fellow (taxpaying) citizens, given how she free rides off their honesty. A similar case can be made for saying that denting a car out of negligence (not accidentally) manifests a level of contempt for its owner. Negligence might be mitigating, but it is not exculpatory. Again, Kleinig accepts that it *would* be appropriate to say that I “show contempt” for you if, down the line, I refuse to accept responsibility for denting your car (Kleinig, “Defending,” 2). But just as retrospective responsibility is parasitic on prospective responsibility, the contempt shown by not accepting responsibility is surely just doubling down on the contempt manifested in the original failure to act responsibly. (Cf. “[W]e hold a parent retrospectively responsible for her child’s truancy only insofar as it was her prospective responsibility to ensure that he attended school,” writes Antony Duff, “Who is Responsible, for What, to Whom?” *Ohio State Journal of Criminal Law* 2, no. 2 (2005): 443.

⁶ Granted, moral threats will often be implicitly conveyed via physical threats, but such a medium is not essential.

⁷ Kleinig, “Defending,” 2.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

initial paper.¹⁰ But I will add two points of clarification that may serve to ameliorate Kleinig's concerns. First, like the threat of a nuclear war, a victim need not be fully conscious of being under an ongoing moral threat at every waking moment. It is the threat that is ongoing, not their subjective awareness of it. Second, the persistence of a moral threat is inherently linked to the wrongdoer. It is not "ongoing" in the sense that, once initiated, it takes on a life of its own, like the smile of a Cheshire cat. A moral threat can only exist for as long as the wrongdoer fails to denounce and withdraw the message of disrespect that was implicit in their wrongdoing. Until then, the victim can only assume that the offender stands by his original message.¹¹

Wrongdoing as a threat to self-respect

Kleinig argues that, in claiming that a wrongdoer's "refusal to show respect constitutes an ongoing threat to [the victim's] self-respect," I am positing an "unnecessarily strong connection between the respect of others and self-respect."¹² Later, he claims that "[a] person who chooses to forgive – whether or not the wrongdoer acknowledges the wrongdoing – may have a strong sense of self-respect and of the seriousness of the wrong that was done."¹³

But we need to distinguish between a person's sense of self-respect in general and her self-respect in relation to the wrongdoing. For most victims, their overall self-respect will not depend entirely on how the wrongdoer sees them. We all have multiple sources of self-respect. For some of us, these pre-existing sources will be so strong and abundant that they will tend to overwhelm certain kinds of threats. This is why some victims can retain a strong sense of self-respect in general, even when faced with an unapologetic

¹⁰ See Brookes, "Moral Grounds," 4.

¹¹ This provides an answer to Kleinig's contention that it is "deeply counterintuitive" to suppose "there can be no forgiveness of the dead" (Kleinig, "Defending," 4). A wrongdoer cannot stand by their message of disrespect if they no longer exist—in which case forgiveness will no longer be applicable. The victim may still be subject to recurrent feelings of bitterness and anger, perhaps triggered by memories of the wrong or its ongoing impact on their lives. But there are effective therapeutic strategies that can help to remove or minimize such feelings, none of which need be conceived of as forgiveness. As to unknown perpetrators (Kleinig, "Defending," n. 10) or "non-apologetic wrongdoers with whom one has lost all contact" (Kleinig, "Defending," 4)—which may include the dead if there is an afterlife—the moral threat their actions have posed will remain, and so forgiveness, on my account, will not be an option, at least until contact becomes possible. But there are morally acceptable strategies other than forgiveness that can, in the meantime, marginalize the victim's subjective awareness of the threat to their self-respect, and thus the extent to which feelings of resentment will dominate their life. For instance, the victim could focus their attention on other sources of self-respect, such as the love and respect of close colleagues, friends, and family.

¹² Kleinig, "Defending," 2.

¹³ Ibid., 3.

wrongdoer. Nevertheless, as I argued in my initial paper, we are social creatures, and so are, to a greater or lesser extent, vulnerable to how others see us, even strangers. Consequently, most of us will tend to resist the message of disrespect that is conveyed to us whenever we are wronged. From a normative perspective, this reaction is entirely warranted, so long as it is morally appropriate and proportionate. And this, I have argued, is the role of resentment. The purpose of this instinctive emotional reaction is to provide us with a means of protecting ourselves against specific challenges to our self-respect.¹⁴

In sum, my claim is not that forgiveness in the absence of an apology evidences a lack of self-respect in general. But it does betray the victim's unwillingness to affirm or stand by her own moral equality in the face of a specific challenge. As such, it manifests a lack of self-respect in relation to the wrongdoing in question, and thus fails to constitute an appropriate assessment of the seriousness of the breach.

Resentment as a protective shield

Kleinig argues that, in characterizing resentment as a "protective shield" against the ongoing moral threat posed by wrongdoing, I have "distorted the experience of resentment." Kleinig suggests that "my reaction to being wronged may be 'what a nerve!' rather than a sense of threat against which I have to be secured."¹⁵ But this simply pits *how* I am reacting (resentment)

¹⁴ Kleinig is "somewhat puzzled" by my distinction between vindictiveness as an "offensive" response and resentment as "defensive" on the grounds that "many would see resentment as implying 'deserving of punishment'" (Kleinig, "Defending," n. 11). But first, this "puzzle" dissolves once one distinguishes my own account of resentment from those who conflate resentment with vindictiveness, and so, in my view, misconstrue it as "offensive" (e.g., Resentment is "a retributive passion that instinctively seeks to exact a due measure of punishment." Charles L. Griswold, *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 39. Or again, resentment involves "wishing harm" to the wrongdoer or "relishing the discomfort and pain that he suffers." Eve Garrard and David McNaughton, *Forgiveness*. Durham, NC: Acumen, 2010), 23). Such accounts are especially unfortunate, since they mistakenly entail that a victim's inability to forgive must, by definition, be due to her vindictiveness or hatred, and so she can, for that reason, be deemed morally deficient. Second, even if resentment was offensive, that would not, on its own, be sufficient to render the wrongdoer "deserving of punishment." Punishment must be grounded in public interest considerations, not the private feelings or views of the victim. This is why, as Kleinig notes, "forgiven or not, Roof was not exempted from punishment," Kleinig, "Defending," n. 21. Cf. "Just because a person commits an offence against me . . . that does not privilege my voice above that of the court (acting 'in the general public interest') in the matter of the offender's punishment," writes Andrew Ashworth, *Principles of Criminal Law*, 4th ed. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2003), 428.

¹⁵ Kleinig, "Defending," 2.

against *why* I am reacting in this way (to protect myself against a challenge to my self-respect). The two are not mutually exclusive. Resentment only works because it contains exactly the right cognitive content and qualitative feel (an inner tightening or toughening up) needed to protect ourselves against the kind of threat that we face whenever we fail to be shown due respect: “No, you are wrong,” it says, “I *am* your moral equal.”

1.2 *Forgiveness as Morally Discretionary*

Kleinig claims that forgiveness is normally construed, even by advocates of conditional forgiveness, as a “determination to forgo resentment” on moral grounds.¹⁶ This element of moral discretion, he suggests, is incompatible with my characterization of the experience of forgiveness as occurring when our resentment “naturally falls away” in the face of a genuine apology.¹⁷

On the contrary, both conditional and unconditional forgiveness are discretionary in precisely the same way.¹⁸ As I argued in my initial paper, the emotion of resentment is not within our immediate control. We cannot stop feeling resentment at will. But we do have some control over the conditions to which it is a natural reaction. Hence, the “determination to forgo my resentment” should be understood as meaning the determination to do whatever will make it possible for my resentment to dissipate. The requirement of any normative account of forgiveness, then, is to identify not only those option(s) that will have the desired psychological effect, but also what option(s) would be morally acceptable.

Conditional forgiveness takes the view that the only option of this kind that is available to a victim is to place themselves in a position whereby they can hear a genuine apology. Only then will their resentment dissipate in a morally acceptable way. It might be thought that this removes the victim’s discretion to forgive, since it is now dependent on the wrongdoer’s apology. But this fails to recognize the complexity of communication. A sender’s message is not like a drug that is injected into the receiver, without any possibility of rejection or loss of content.¹⁹ In saying that resentment will “naturally fall away” in the face of a genuine apology, then, I do not mean that every victim, no matter

¹⁶ Ibid., 3.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ As I argued in my initial paper, the victim’s *offer* of forgiveness is also morally discretionary. But this decision can (or should) only take place after their resentment has dissipated in the experience of forgiveness, and so is not germane to the *prospective* decision to forgo their resentment. See Brookes, “Moral Grounds,” 4-5.

¹⁹ Cf. Hugh Mackay, *Why Don’t People Listen? Solving the Communication Problem* (Macmillan Australia, 1994), 15.

what they bring to the table, can expect this outcome. The resentment felt by a victim will not dissipate unless they can hear a genuine apology for what it is. They need to be able to absorb and accept the fact that the wrongdoer has denounced and withdrawn their message of disrespect. In other words, they need to be willing to forgive. Ordinarily, it will take a great deal of inner work to reach this point. If they are prepared to undertake this work, then, when they do hear a sincere apology, their resentment will naturally fall away.

In my initial paper, I argued that, if the victim were to engage in the kind of reflections and transformative inner work that would enable them to take into account Kleinig's three considerations—the suffering of the wrongdoer, a sense of moral solidarity with them, and, where relevant, a pre-existing relationship—this would increase their willingness to forgive. But the wrongdoer is in no position to demand that the victim undertake this preparatory work, nor can they assume that it has been done. No wrongdoer should expect that a sincere apology will be sufficient to elicit forgiveness (“I’ve said ‘sorry’, so why can’t you forgive me?”). If the victim’s resentment dissipates in response to an apology, this will only be due to the fact that they have freely chosen to put in the requisite preliminary work—the potential difficulty and sheer beneficence of which should not be underestimated.²⁰

In sum, conditional and unconditional forgiveness are both discretionary, and in the same way. Where they differ is how they conceive of what it is that a victim is doing when they engage in the inner work mentioned above. On Kleinig’s account, this discretionary work can, even in the absence of an apology, have the effect of diminishing resentment and it is driven by morally laudable motives. So, it should, he claims, be accepted as a species of forgiveness. I agree that the victim’s decision to undertake this inner work is laudable, and that it can result in significant psychological healing, but it is not yet forgiveness. This work only makes it possible for the victim to experience forgiveness.

This distinction can be further elucidated by examining Kleinig’s statement that: “Forgiveness changes the wrongdoer’s moral status in the eyes of the wronged person; it does not require that the wrongdoer become a better

²⁰ Kleinig suggests that, even if Dylann Roof had shown genuine remorse and offered a sincere apology, Roxane Gay might still have said “I . . . am done forgiving” (Kleinig, “Defending,” 5) —perhaps on the grounds that, from her perspective, any such apology would invariably be “tainted” by the unresolved historical wrongs of slavery and ongoing cultural racism. But far from showing that the constraints of conditional forgiveness are too narrow, Kleinig’s hypothetical instead illustrates how extraordinarily difficult it can be for a victim to absorb or accept even a genuine apology, especially when the wrongdoing has caused severe harm and ongoing trauma.

person.”²¹ What is this “change in moral status”? Is it that, in the eyes of the victim, the wrongdoer is no longer seen as morally responsible for what they did? Or that their actions did not, in fact, fail to treat the victim as a moral equal? Perhaps the wrongdoer has undergone moral changes in ways that are unrelated to the wrongdoing, such as an increase in their trustworthiness or humility. But Kleinig rules out the notion that forgiveness should require that the wrongdoer “become a better person.” Yet it is hard to see what other changes in moral status are possible. The reality is that, insofar as the wrongdoer is unapologetic, they retain the moral status of a wrongdoer who, so far as the victim can determine, continues to stand by their wrongdoing. The victim can only change how they see an unapologetic wrongdoer’s moral status by engaging in a mental sleight of hand. They must be willing to overlook, condone, dismiss, or discount the moral reality of the situation.

2. A CRITIQUE OF UNCONDITIONAL FORGIVENESS

In the second part of his reply, Kleinig argues that the discretionary nature of forgiveness undermines my critique of his account. “We have a fairly wide choice,” he claims, “in how we display our generosity to others and how and which of their sufferings we believe it appropriate to take into account in our dealings with them.”²² Thus, we do not need to be constrained by the assumption that forgiveness requires a genuine apology. We are free to explore alternative moral reasons, such as the three circumstances Kleinig proposes. We can choose to ground our forgiveness in whatever insights can be gleaned from, say, our sense of moral solidarity with the wrongdoer, so long as in doing so we exercise “virtues such as generosity, charity, love, mercy or grace.”²³

But it is not clear that we have as much discretionary latitude as Kleinig suggests. What we choose to take into account when we forgive must be a morally appropriate grounding for that particular end. I can choose to become sensitized to the “benightedness” of a Dylann Roof, but it does not follow that the sense of moral solidarity that I thereby attain can, on its own, constitute a morally acceptable ground for forgiving him.

This point can perhaps be made more vivid by exploring Kleinig’s contention that conditional forgiveness cannot account for situations in which “the alleged wrongdoer and the victim cannot agree as to the moral facts of the case. A believes that B wronged her; B does not believe that he did wrong.”

²¹ Kleinig, “Defending,” 3.

²² *Ibid.*, 4.

²³ *Ibid.*, 3.

In such cases, Kleinig suggests, it should be possible for A to exercise her prerogative to forgive B (even though B sees no need to be forgiven) so that “they can repair ruptured relations,” which had hitherto been blocked by A’s resentment toward B.²⁴

We can agree that repairing relations is a morally worthy goal. But, under these circumstances, is it morally appropriate for A to do so by forgiving B? The obstacle in this situation is not A’s lack of forgiveness, but rather the fact that either A or B is not in possession of the moral facts. If A is mistaken, then, if she were to “forgive” B, this would only compound her error, since B has done nothing for which he needs to be forgiven. If B has wronged A, but refuses to accept that he did, then A’s unilateral “forgiveness” will not repair the moral breach, since B has not yet denounced and withdrawn his message of disrespect.

Assuming that both A and B are acting in good faith, the only way forward is for them to re-check the evidence available to them, try to address their own prejudices, put aside their reputational fears or the shame of being wrong, do their best to persuade the other (without manipulation or coercion), and so on. If neither A nor B are able to change their minds, then they would have two options: (a) they could try to resume the relationship on an agree-to-disagree basis; but (b) if the wrong is sufficiently serious, then, given that A still believes she has sufficient reason to think that B has wronged her, B’s refusal to accept responsibility and apologize for this wrong would constitute reasonable grounds for A to end or at least suspend the relationship until one or the other changes their mind.²⁵ Estrangement is rarely pleasant, but in some cases it is the only viable option if we are to maintain and protect our self-respect and avoid re-victimization.²⁶ When a moral breach occurs, the “presumptive moral status quo”²⁷ cannot be magically conjured up out of thin air. Forgiveness is not a matter of pretending that the moral breach has been healed or that it no longer matters. And if it were, it would lack any moral credibility.

²⁴ Ibid., 4.

²⁵ Kleinig might object that, in such a scenario, A’s continuing resentment could “become an instrument of manipulation” (Kleinig, “Defending,” 5), compelling B to apologize even though he believes he is innocent. But this possibility is hardly an inherent feature of conditional forgiveness, understood as an account of the conditions under which we *ought* to forgive. A begrudging and insincere apology is precisely the opposite of what such an account would prescribe.

²⁶ As Kleinig puts it, “Where forgiveness is a prelude to reconciliation between persons who have a pre-existing relationship and the forgiver wishes to re-establish that relationship, apology might well be required.” Kleinig, “Defending,” n. 22.

²⁷ Kleinig, “Defending,” 4.

3. CONCLUSION

A moral breach can be usefully compared to a bridge that has been destroyed, with the victim standing on one side of the breach and the wrongdoer on the other. The bridge cannot be re-constructed from one side only: it will eventually collapse for lack of support once it extends across the halfway point. Both the victim and the wrongdoer must therefore be willing to construct their respective sides of the bridge if the structure is to hold. The victim will need to do whatever inner work will enable them to hear a genuine apology, and thus experience forgiveness. The wrongdoer must face their shame, acknowledge their responsibility, demonstrate remorse, and offer a sincere apology to the victim.

Does this mean that the victim's endeavor to forgive is ultimately dependent on the wrongdoer's apology? Yes, but only for the final closing stage. The victim remains free to construct their half of the bridge regardless. If an apology is not forthcoming by the time the victim has completed their work, the breach will of course remain. But the victim will be better able to move on or let go, knowing they have done all they can to heal the moral wound without thereby abjuring their self-respect. Should the offender finish his half of the bridge, however, the two sides will be able to reconnect naturally and appropriately, thus repairing the breach.²⁸

What Kleinig calls "unconditional forgiveness" is, in my view, the victim's construction of their side of the bridge. It can feel somewhat like the experience of forgiveness because it is oriented toward the goal of moral repair, and because it can have the effect of reducing the intensity or dominance of resentment. And since it is driven by virtuous motives, it is morally laudable in its own right. Indeed, I would concede that this kind of inner work is an essential stage in the overall process of forgiveness. But for all the reasons given, it is a step too far to conceive of this work, taken on its own, as forgiveness.

²⁸ This analogy should not be taken to imply that conditional forgiveness requires or necessarily results in the resumption of a relationship. Moral repair may be necessary, but it is not sufficient for reconciliation. As Kleinig notes, a betrayed wife can choose to "part ways" with a genuinely apologetic, but "akratic husband, at the same time forgiving him for his misdeeds," Kleinig, "Defending," 3.